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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that the instructional conversation (IC), a dialogue between teacher and learner in which prior knowledge and experiences are woven together with new material to build higher understanding, can be an effective method for raising the low academic achievement levels of various groups of Native American students. The IC contrasts with the "recitation script" of traditional western schooling, which is routinized and dominated by the teacher. In order for ICs to be a truly effective method, however, educators must take into account the following factors concerning the indigenous cultures of their students: (1) sociolinguistics; (2) cognition; (3) motivation; and (4) social organization. A description of each of these factors and their effect on the implementation of ICs among Native American populations is included in this digest. Contains 13 references. (VWL)

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Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics

Instructional Conversations in Native American Classrooms

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

December 1994

Instructional Conversations in Native American Classrooms

(EDO-FL-95-05)

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

This Digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, *Effective Instructional Conversation in Native American Classrooms*, by Roland Tharp and Lois Yamauchi. Copies of the report are available for $4.00 from the Center for Applied Linguistics, NCRCDSLL,1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037.

Research indicates that the instructional conversation (IC) can be an effective method for raising the low academic achievement levels of various groups of Native American students (Tharp, 1989; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). The IC is a dialog between teacher and learner in which prior knowledge and experiences are woven together with new material to build higher understanding. IC contrasts with the "recitation script" of traditional western schooling, which is highly routinized and dominated by the teacher.

In order for the IC to be a truly effective method, however, educators must take into account the following factors concerning the indigenous cultures of their students: (a) sociolinguistics; (b) cognition; (c) motivation; and (d) social organization. A description of each of these factors and their role in implementing ICs among Native American populations follows.

Sociolinguistics

Conventions regarding conversational style vary across cultures. When a teacher and students from different cultural backgrounds attempt to communicate, confusion and misunderstanding can arise as their communicative styles interact. This problem is particularly acute when the parties involved have no prior understanding of one another's culturally based communicative conventions. For example, research has shown that "wait time"—the amount of time speakers are given to speak and respond—is substantially longer in Native American culture than in European-American culture.

For Native Americans, the IC appears to be enhanced by extended wait time. Winterton (1976) studied the effect of extended wait time on Pueblo Indian children's conversations with a teacher. Results indicated that extended wait time, especially when it followed students' responses, was significantly related to the length of students' responses and the amount of student-to-student interaction. Verbal participation of less vocal students also increased, as did overall unsolicited but appropriate verbal responses.

A study by Guilmet (1979) provides some insight into other possible reasons why Native American children experience communication difficulties in classrooms. Navajo and European-American mothers were shown videotaped episodes of Navajo and European-American children participating in a classroom. The mothers were told to rate the children on a number of dimensions. Differences concerning one particular episode—a European-American boy engaged in high levels of verbal and physical activity—were especially striking: The Navajo mothers believed the high verbal and physical activity were negative attributes (and therefore rated the boy negatively), whereas the European-American mothers believed them to be positive. By implication, it is possible that a European-American teacher might negatively evaluate the overall communicative and interactional styles of some Native American children.

Other sociolinguistic variables that may influence the IC between European-American teachers and Native American children are the volume at which teachers and students speak to each other [Native Americans tend to speak more softly (Darnell, 1979)] and expectations regarding speaker- and listener-directed gaze (Native American students might look down to express politeness when addressed by a teacher). This indicates, then, that communication embodies much more than speech alone.

Cognition

In schools everywhere, there is a strong tendency to emphasize verbal over visual symbolic thinking and to approach situations analytically rather than holistically. It follows that students whose cognitive tendencies do not match those school expectations are more likely to be less academically successful (Tharp, 1989). There is considerable evidence that Native American children suffer such a mismatch, since by-and-large they tend to think in holistic rather than analytic terms (Tharp, 1991). Informal learning in many Native American cultures is acquired in a holistic context.

Effective instructional conversation can accommodate differences in cognitive tendencies by providing support when cognitive strategies are less familiar to students and by capitalizing on students' preferred ways of thinking. The instructional conversation with Native American students is most effective when this visual/holistic tendency is taken into account. That is, even when teachers want to emphasize verbal/analytic skills, instruction can be more successful when using a visual/holistic approach.

For example, during ICs, concepts can be embedded holistically in students' previous knowledge and experiences, particularly by linking concepts to the children's world outside school. Experiences with Navajo and Zuni Pueblo children suggest that the incorporation of holistic or visual elements into ICs make these lessons more interesting and engaging and ultimately produce more expanded discourse (Tharp & Yamauchi, 1994). Navajo third-grade children clearly preferred—and often demanded—to hear or read a story through to the end before discussion, rather than discussing it in successive piecemeal sections.

Motivation

Native American students may not be motivated to participate in instructional conversations at school, because they are not interested in the materials they are supposed to be discussing. Often these materials are based on the experiences of the majority culture and may not seem relevant to the children's lives. Some Native American schools have attempted to introduce more culturally relevant materials in their curriculum. For example, the Pacific Northwest Indian Reading and Language Development Program represented

an attempt to develop a culturally relevant reading curriculum for Grades 1-3. Teachers transcribed stories told by their Native American students and used them as reading texts. A one-year post-test revealed gains in participants' oral language production and language complexity as compared to a control group. Gains were especially dramatic in students who had been identified by pre-test scores as "non verbal." The materials also had an impact in the home environment. Native American parents judged the culturally relevant books to be worthwhile and useful and reported an increase in language-related activities at home, which were developed around the culturally relevant materials (Butterfield, 1983).

Social Organization

The ways that classrooms and schools organize internally has profound effects on how instructional conversations are conducted and, indeed, on whether they are conducted at all. The social organization of a traditional American classroom is primarily whole-class oriented, with a teacher who leads, instructs, and demonstrates to the whole group. Some form of individual practice often follows, and learning is assessed by individual achievement. This system is ineffective for children of many cultures, who respond to this structure with a low level of attention to both the teacher and the coursework and with a high level of attention-seeking from peers (Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974). Unfortunately, teachers usually attribute this behavior to low academic motivation rather than to inappropriate social structures (Tharp & Gallimore, 1976).

A study of the informal learning activity settings of Navajo and Hopi children indicated that adults regularly assign children their chores, but leave them to perform without adult supervision, even for difficult and complex tasks. For example, 7- or 8-year-olds are often assigned to herd sheep alone or to care for an infant sibling. When children require assistance in fulfilling these responsibilities, they often turn to peers or siblings. Most out-of-school learning for these children takes place in small peer-oriented groups (Rhodes, 1989).

Although successful peer conversations can be developed by small peer work groups, it is also important to understand how the teacher can engage children in successful ICs. The conduct of successful ICs depends heavily on appropriate social organization. Barnhardt (1982) reported on several effective Native American classrooms. She emphasized that the majority of each school day was spent in individual or small group activities. The teachers characteristically moved among the students, kneeling or squatting down on the floor for individual discussion that could be lengthy and quiet because the other students were occupied with their own individual or small group tasks. To signal that another part of the lesson was arriving, the teacher raised her voice, which indicated to the larger group that it was once again part of the audience.

A final feature of effective activity settings for instructional conversations is joint productive activity, a common interaction pattern in many Native American cultures. Joint productive activities refer to instructional activities that are given focus by actually producing something—a dwelling, a work of art, a performance, a science experiment—or by solving a problem or making a plan. Not only should there be adequate opportunity for cooperative work among groups of peers in the classroom, but the jointness of activities should also include the teacher working as a participant in the activity—"teacher" being understood to include elders and experts.

Grubis (1991) reports a joint productive activity from an Eskimo village school in the Point Hope region. A whaling boat constructed in the school by students and community members became the context for instruction in basic skills. In biology, a seal was dissected and whales were the object of scientific study. With knowledge provided by elders, the social and cultural dynamics of whaling informed social science in a unified K-12 curriculum strand.

Attention to the above factors—sociolinguistics, cognition, motivation, and social organization—and a concern for embedding abstract concepts in everyday, culturally meaningful contexts, will help to ensure that the IC is an effective instructional tool for Native American students.

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